



## Montgomery County Community Action Board Testimony for FY24 Operating Budget

Dr. Jeffery Johnson, Chair

April 11, 2023

Good afternoon, Council President Glass, Council Vice President Friedson, and members of the County Council. My name is Dr. Jeffery Johnson and I am the Chair of the Montgomery County Community Action Board. Thank you for the opportunity to share our Board's budget priorities for FY24.

The Community Action Board's role includes serving as the governing body for the Community Action Agency, as well as for the Head Start Program, along with the Head Start Parent Policy Council. The County Code's enabling legislation for Community Action states in part, that "it is the public policy of the County to promote programs to develop leadership among poor citizens to solve community problems; and develop broad community strategies to attack the basic causes of poverty." With one-third of the board's membership from the low-income community, democratically elected to represent the needs of low-income people, and with the Community Advocacy Institute participants bringing their lived experience to improve our community, I am pleased to share key priorities to enable the Community Action Agency to continue its exceptional work addressing low-income residents' critical needs.

I would like to start by thanking the County Council for your support. We appreciated the Council's leadership during the Takoma East Silver Spring (TESS) Community Action Center's move to its new Flower Avenue location last summer. We have also appreciated the County Executive adding the Navigation Program to the agency, with four new positions.

To continue to provide the high-quality services the Community Action Agency offers, we are again requesting staffing enhancements, requests that were shared with the HHS Committee last fall, and in previous years.

We do not think it is equitable that the County has converted other HHS broker positions to merit staff positions but has not agreed to do the same thing for Athena brokers at the TESS Community Action Center. This is troubling, as one broker has served for more than ten years, and the other for six, both funded by the agency's federal Community Services Block Grant. As these staff deliver critically needed, whole-family services to residents of the Long Branch community, our Board requests that the Council adds two merit Community Services Aide III positions to the TESS budget.

Another Athena broker position at TESS is the Opportunity Coach, who like her colleague in East County, engages a cohort of families to develop goals and take steps to support parents and children. Families are linked to employment services; child care, housing, and food assistance, and meet with their Coach to progress towards their goals. The Opportunity Coach position has been funded by our CSBG federal grant, and through a state grant to the Maryland Community Action Partnership, which has been discontinued. After the Kresge grant ended, the County supported adding a merit position in East County. We are requesting the same – that a merit position be added for an Opportunity Coach at TESS to ensure ongoing access for residents of Long Branch.

As I mentioned, we are excited about CAA's new Navigation Unit, which relies on highly trained, culturally competent Navigators connecting residents to services at various sites, including Service Consolidation Hubs, helping people who face challenges accessing services. This important work has extended the previous work delivered during the pandemic by five CSBG CARES-funded brokers and a coordinator, who had all been contractors. To better address the needs at other sites, and to assure continuity when navigators are called to address Mass Care emergencies, we are requesting two additional Community Services Aide III positions in FY24.

For example, the navigation team continues to address the victims' needs following the Arrive Apartment fire, and will continue to serve those residents until their households become more stable. Having two additional merit positions will ensure that the team can continue to support our partners, while working with HHS colleagues to coordinate the needs of people experiencing trauma following fires and other emergencies.

During this budget season, you will be hearing from participants in our board's free advocacy training program for lower-income residents, the Community Advocacy Institute. Several more will be submitting written testimony on a wide range of issues, including affordable housing, mental health services, and the need for additional services for people with disabilities. The CAI's 100+ graduates now serve on County advisory groups, nonprofit boards, the County's Climate Stories Ambassadors Program, and more. We are on track to have 21 participants graduate next month, including eight Spanish-speaking participants. Ensuring that this bilingual program's workshop materials are in English and Spanish, that all correspondence is bilingual, and organizing simultaneous interpretation at all activities requires additional staff support. We are requesting \$36,000 in general funding for a part-time, part-year bilingual contactor.

As the governing body for Head Start, our board has been closely monitoring the state's Blueprint Plan, with special attention to the impact on PreK expansion. Children in PreK and their families require the same level of comprehensive services as children in Head Start. We are requesting that the Council monitor the level of services for health and family support services as the Blueprint is implemented. We ask that additional Family Service Workers are hired, as needed, so that caseloads remain at 75 families per FSW, or less. In addition, to meet immediate and urgent needs, we request that the Council add two additional nurses and one additional dental hygienist to the School Health Services Budget in FY24.

As several hundred PreK spots are added in the coming years, we continue advocating for a mixed delivery system that includes private child care providers, in addition to public school teachers, and ask for the Council's ongoing support and leadership. The CAB supported

Governor Moore's Educator Shortage Act of 2023, which would adjust the teacher certification requirements for preschool teachers, helping more private providers complete this process.

The Community Action Agency's Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program is about to wrap up a very successful tax season, providing free tax help to lower-income households at four sites, plus virtual appointments. As United Way of the National Capital Area did not fund any VITA programs this year, the VITA partnership lost approximately \$20,000 in grant funding, including its texting campaign, with 155,000 text messages informing residents about the EITC and Child Tax Credits last year. We recommend that the Council allocate funding to stabilize this outreach, and that the Council consider prioritizing VITA programs for our partners seeking grant-funding.

This year, CAB continued its advocacy for the Earned Income Tax Credit by supporting Governor Moore's Family Prosperity Act, making previous expansions of the state EITC and Child Tax Credit permanent. Research shows that the EITC is one of the best tools to reduce poverty and contributes to better health and educational outcomes for families. We thank the Council for funding the County's credit, the Working Families Income Supplement, at a 70% match of the state EITC this year and for including ITIN filers. We hope that in the years to come, funding will allow the Council to ensure a 100% match of the state EITC again.

Finally, we are excited to share that our agency's [Community Needs Assessment](#) is now available on the CAA website. This report described the most significant needs facing lower-income County residents and includes an overview of the Community Action Agency's services, along with the services of other County and nonprofit programs. We have worked with Maryland Community Action Partnership and University of Washington and are pleased to share that the [Maryland Self-Sufficiency Standard Calculator](#) is now online. It shows that a family of four in Montgomery County with two working adults, one preschooler, and one school-age child needs to earn \$122,943 to meet the Standard – four times the Federal Poverty Level. We will keep you posted about an updated County Self-Sufficiency Standard report, to be

completed this fiscal year, which will highlight how County programs like the Working Parents Assistance program make a difference.

We thank the Council for your ongoing support of many of our board's key priorities, including affordable housing, food and nutrition programs, and policies to boost economic opportunity. We ask that you consider the requests shared with you today. We look forward to working with you to continue to explore programs and opportunities to support vulnerable community members.